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# **The Effect of Cultural Differences on Service Encounter Satisfaction**

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### **Introduction**

Among the most important changes to the marketing of services during the last two decades has been the globalisation of markets, which has created many opportunities for service firms to expand internationally (Knight, 1999). In addition, there has been an increase in multiculturalism, with different subcultures living within a country (Riddle, 1992). According to the World Trade Organisation, the value of global trade in services was estimated at \$1.2 trillion in 1995, which constituted about 25 percent of global trade.

Services entail unique features that distinguish them from manufactured goods (Shostack, 1977). First, they are largely intangible and cannot be touched, transported, or stored. Second, services tend to be inseparable, that is, production usually cannot be separated from consumption. Third, services are perishable, meaning that they must usually be consumed at the time they are produced, and finally, services are highly heterogeneous, and every service encounter is unique and often highly customised.

One of the main concerns when marketing services within multicultural countries or internationally is the fact that the intangible and inseparable characteristics of services are particularly prone to cultural influences. Culture is defined as a pattern of assumptions, values, and beliefs whose shared meaning is acquired by members of a group (Hofstede, 1980). Culture has been found to affect the way people express, interact, and engage in business with others (Triandis, 1989; Tse et. al., 1988).

Due to the features of intangibility and inseparability, service customers perceive quality mainly during the service encounter. Service encounter refers to the contact situation between the customer and the service provider (Price et. al, 1995). This dyadic interaction between service provider and customer during a service encounter is an important determinant of the customer's overall satisfaction with the service (Solomon et. al., 1985). Service encounters are called inter-cultural if the service provider and the customer belong to different cultures.

During the inter-cultural service encounter, both customer and provider interact, and their expectations and behaviors are affected by their cultural backgrounds. Particularly for services that are highly intangible and require close provider-consumer contact, cultural differences can affect customer satisfaction with the service encounter. Previous research has shown that cultural differences can potentially lead to misunderstanding and business failures due to differences in values, beliefs, and norms (Hoecklin, 1995). Therefore, in international or multicultural service situations, customer expectations during the service encounter are likely to differ from the provider's expectations, since they are closely related to their culture (Clark, 1990).

With a variety of cultures, a big challenge for service firms is maintaining consistency in providing services, and at the same time adjusting to local cultural preferences (Riddle, 1992). Culture should not simply be considered an obstacle to doing business across or within nations. Several studies show that firms with the ability to leverage cultural factors through learning and training, are able to develop profitable markets and benefit from sustainable competitive advantages (Riddle, 1992).

Despite the relevance of this topic, very little research has examined the effect of culture on service encounters (Winsted, 1997). According to Knight (1999), research on international services until now has been largely exploratory, descriptive, and focused on

particular industries or international locations. Similarly, Clark and Rajaratman (1999) state the need for the development of theory, constructs and conceptual frameworks that account for the cultural sensitive dimensions of services. Therefore, the main goal of this paper is to fill this gap by providing a model, which examines the effect of cultural differences between customers and service providers on service encounter satisfaction.

This paper seeks to contribute to the services marketing literature in two ways. First, it adds to the service literature by addressing the effect of cultural differences on service encounter satisfaction, a topic that has scant research. Second, a conceptual model, and several propositions for future empirical tests are proposed. This model draws from services, role theory, and cross-cultural research. As a managerial implication, service managers that are reaching new cultures either nationally or internationally need to understand the effect of cultural differences of customers and providers in order to avoid customer dissatisfaction with the encounter.

This paper proceeds as follows. A review of cross-cultural studies is followed by the development of a conceptual model that links the effect of cultural differences on service encounter satisfaction. Finally, several propositions for future testing are stated.

### **The Role of Culture in Services**

One of the most important social influences which has a profound impact on the way consumers perceive and behave is culture (Clark, 1990). Culture is defined as a pattern of assumptions, values, and beliefs whose shared meaning is acquired by members of a group (Hofstede, 1980). Attitudes, beliefs, and values affect the way people process and evaluate information from the environment (Triandis, 1989). Some of them may be universal and have the same meaning across time and geography and other elements may be extremely culture specific (Hofstede, 1980).

Conducting international business across boundaries requires interaction with people and their organisations, which are embedded in different cultural environments. This interaction can potentially lead to misunderstanding and business failures due to differences in values, beliefs, and norms. Therefore, understanding how cultural differences affect international business is very important because it can help predict responses of suppliers, distributors, customers, and even competitors.

Several researchers have classified countries based on different cultural characteristics, but it is Hofstede (1980), perhaps who offers the seminal work in operationalising national culture. By examining between-country differences in values and perceptions through factor analysis and other statistical methods, Hofstede (1980) identified four dimensions of national culture. These dimensions are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, and masculinity/femininity.

Individualistic cultures are those in which ties between individuals are loose and everyone is expected to look after himself, meanwhile collectivist cultures value membership and identification with the group to which they belong (Hofstede, 1980). Power distance refers to the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 1980). Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations, and masculinity expresses the extent to which dominant values in societies are masculine (Hofstede, 1980).

Previous cross-cultural research has related Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions to executive decision-making (Tse, et. al, 1988), relationship marketing (Bianchi, et. al., 2000), service quality evaluations (Matilla, 1999; Stauss and Mang, 1999; Winsted, 1997; Mahlorta et. al, 1994), and service quality expectations (Donthu and Yoo, 1998; Furrer et. al., 2000). Specifically in the service field, Malhorta et. al. (1994) compared service quality evaluations in developed and developing countries. These authors addressed the effect of cultural factors such as individualism, collectivism, power distance, time value, and communication, on service quality dimensions for developed and developing countries. Although these authors did not develop an empirical study, they proposed that developing nations are high in power distance and collectivism, and placed greater emphasis on human touch, and personal contact than on reliability to assess the quality of the service.

Winsted (1997) examined service quality evaluations in two culturally different countries; Japan and the U.S. Her study showed that customers from Japan and the U.S. evaluated services differently. For example, friendliness, authenticity, and promptness were important in evaluating service quality for individualistic consumers from the U.S. In contrast, Japanese customers who are collectivist, valued empathy and caring for the consumer. Furthermore, Japanese consumers in their evaluation of service quality did not consider several behaviours that were important for determining service quality for U.S. consumers.

Similarly, Matilla (1999) examined the role of culture on consumer evaluation of services in the hotel industry. The author found that customer evaluations of the service encounter were lower for Asian (high power distance) than for Anglo (low power distance) travellers. In addition, Asian travellers displayed fewer emotions in the service encounter, than Anglo travellers. Stauss and Mang (1999) also found that cultural differences had a significant effect on service evaluation. They explained that cultural "shocks", which led to consumer dissatisfaction, occurred when service providers did not meet the culturally determined expectations of foreign customers.

Donthu and Yoo (1998) studied the effect of cultural orientation of customers on their service quality expectations. Their results showed that consumers with low power distance had higher service quality expectations and expected responsive and reliable service. Individualistic and high uncertainty avoidance customers also had higher service quality expectations and expected empathy and assurance from the service provider.

Recently, Furrer et. al., (2000), conceptually linked cultural dimensions with service quality dimensions in the retail banking services. In addition, they included three contingent variables; powerful vs. weak customers, male-female service providers, and frequent-infrequent service situations. The authors found that the relative importance of the service quality dimension varied across cultures. For example, power distance was negatively related to empathy, responsiveness, and reliability, but positively related to tangibles and assurance. Based on their findings the authors develop a cultural service quality index in order to segment international service markets.

In sum, these empirical studies highlight the fact that services are culture-sensitive. Furthermore, these studies suggest that there is a higher probability for differences to exist in inter-cultural service encounters than in service encounters where customers and providers belong to the same culture. The following framework will

present a model and propositions that relate the effect of cultural differences on customer service encounter satisfaction.

### **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual model is proposed which shows the effect of cultural differences between a customer and a service provider on customer satisfaction with a service encounter (see figure 1). This relationship is mediated by two variables: mutual understanding and congruency in expectations between provider and customer in a service encounter. Two moderator variables are also proposed in the model: the level of intangibility of the service, and degree of proximity between the customer and the service provider. Both of these variables are suggested to strengthen the relationship between cultural differences and service encounter satisfaction.

**Insert Figure 1 Approx. Here**

### Customer Satisfaction with the Service Encounter

In service research, the term service encounter refers to the contact situation between the service customer and the service provider. Service encounter has been described as “the face-to-face interaction between a buyer and a seller in a service setting” (Solomon et. al, 1985), and as “the dyadic interaction between a customer and a service provider” (Suprenant and Solomon, 1987). Both definitions highlight that the interaction between a service provider and a customer is a dyadic process involving two persons (or more), which depend upon the social and personal characteristic of each. Many service situations, especially those termed “pure” services are characterised by a high degree of person-to-person interaction, such as medical services (Solomon et. al, 1985). This interaction component is essential to the determination of satisfaction with the service encounter, and very important for the evaluation of overall satisfaction with the service, especially for “pure” services (Solomon et al., 1985).

The expectancy disconfirmation model explains customer satisfaction through two processes: customer expectation creation and the disconfirmation of this expectation with provider performance comparisons (Oliver, 1993). However, this research has overlooked the *interaction* between customer and provider in determining customer satisfaction. According to Oliver (1993), satisfaction is an experiential phenomenon unique to the consumer, and differs from service quality in that it is relative to situational expectations and involves non-quality dimensions. To address customer satisfaction it is necessary to assess the co-ordinated actions of both participants and one cannot predict customer satisfaction without considering their mutual understanding during the service encounter (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault, 1990).

### Mutual Understanding

Mutual understanding occurs when there is no distortion between the messages sent and the messages received by two (or more) people. Messages can be sent verbally or through gestures, or symbols, and a high level of understanding is desirable if people are to communicate successfully. Mohr and Bitner (1991) proposed that the greater the mutual understanding between service provider and customer, the higher the customer satisfaction with the service encounter. Thus, the first proposition is:

***P1: During an inter-cultural encounter, mutual understanding between customer and service provider has a positive effect on customer satisfaction with the encounter.***

#### Congruency in Expectations

Previous research in social psychology suggests that congruence in expectations between both individuals in a social encounter is positively related to mutual understanding (Biddle, 1986). If expectations of a service delivery differ between the customer and the service provider then performance by the service provider most probably will differ from the customer's expectations and lead to misunderstanding between them.

When both customers and service providers share common expectations, behavioural uniformity is likely to result (Biddle, 1977), and mutual understanding is likely to be greater (Bitner, Booms, and Mohr, 1994; Schank and Abelson, 1977). Thus, the greater the congruence in expectations for a customer and a service provider during an inter-cultural service encounter, the greater the mutual understanding between them. This leads to the second proposition:

***P2: During an inter-cultural service encounter, congruency in expectations between a customer and a service provider has a positive effect on their mutual understanding.***

#### The Effect of Cultural Differences

Cultural differences of customers and service providers that belong to different cultures (e.g., domestic customer consumes a service from a foreign provider) will probably decrease mutual understanding in the service encounter. Root states (1994, p.267) "communication between persons belonging to different cultures is likely to become distorted by perceptual and encoding/decoding gaps that derive from the cultural distance between sender and receiver". Cultural differences may lead to production-consumption barriers because the difficulty of achieving effective interpersonal communication and mutual understanding will decrease. The third proposition states:

***P3: During an inter-cultural service encounter, cultural differences between customer and service provider have negative effect on their mutual understanding.***

Although cultural differences can have a direct effect on mutual understanding, it can also have an indirect effect by producing discrepancy in consumer-provider expectations (Stauss and Mang, 1999). The sharing of expectations is always bounded by the limits of the social and cultural system. Because culture provides the framework for social interactions, the social rules and customer expectations that are related to service encounters are likely to vary from culture to culture (Matilla, 1999).

Role theory assumes that persons are members of social positions and hold expectations for their own behaviour and for those of other persons (Biddle, 1986). It suggests that similarities in customers and service provider expectations are comparable to when actors share common role expectations because they have a well-defined script (Solomon et. al, 1985).

While consumers and providers from a common culture usually have common expectations about appropriate role behaviours, these expectations may differ between cultures because service providers perform their roles based on a script that does not meet the culturally determined expectations of customers. The root cause of many provider-

customer problems in the service encounter is the failure to read from a common script (Solomon, 1985). Since role expectations are shared in a service encounter, then different forms of behaviours are likely to result when persons do not share expectations (Biddle, 1977; Bitner et al., 1990).

Therefore, discrepancy in expectations in the service encounter may occur when the service provider and customer do not share expectations or a common script of service roles. For example, service provider's expectation of his/her role can differ from the customer's expectations of that role, or customer's expectation of his/her role can differ from the service provider's expectation of consumer's role. In this case, actors are not reading from the same script. Culture affects the script that each actor reads, therefore the expectations of customers and service providers will probably be more discrepant when the difference between the cultures of these interaction partners is greater. Stauss and Mang (1999) found that consumer dissatisfaction occurred when service providers did not meet the culturally determined expectations of foreign customers. Similarly, Donthu and Yoo (1998) found differences in service quality expectations from customers belonging to different cultures. This leads to the fourth proposition:

***P4: During an inter-cultural service encounter, cultural differences between a service provider and a customer have a negative effect on their congruency in expectations.***

#### Cultural Dimensions

Differences all four cultural dimensions (individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity) (Hofstede, 1980) between a service provider and a customer, are proposed to affect mutual understanding and congruency in expectation during the service encounter.

*Individualism / Collectivism:* In individualistic countries such as the U.S. and Canada, an independent self tends to be fostered and members of these cultures tend to emphasise separateness, uniqueness of individuals, and will be motivated by personal preferences (Hofstede, 1980). Meanwhile, in collectivist cultures such as China and Japan, identity tends to be much more connected to the social network, and an interdependent self that emphasises connectedness, social context, and relationships is fostered (Triandis, 1989).

In the service encounter, individualistic consumers will pursue primarily their own interests, and may expect a higher service quality, greater confidence, and reliability from the service provider. A collectivist service provider which values relationships, friendliness and caring, will give priority to group harmony and may not make individual decisions in order to pursue harmony. Collectivist customers on the other hand, may value the mutual interdependence in human relationships and will more easily accept or tolerate mistakes or failures. They will expect greater empathy, caring and respect from the service provider. However, an individualistic service provider will try to deliver the service based on his expectations of what the customer values, which will be more self-focused. Both actors will probably have different expectations of the service delivery due to cultural differences in individualism/collectivism. This leads to the following:

***P5: During an inter-cultural service encounter, differences in individualism between a customer and a service provider have a (a) negative effect on their mutual understanding, (b) negative effect on their congruency in expectations.***

*Power Distance:* In societies with greater power distance, individuals tend to be more submissive toward their superiors and prefer a more autocratic/paternalistic superior (Hofstede 1980). In low power distance countries, individuals value equality and a democratic process. They also view superiors as being similar to them and accessible (Hofstede 1980). Differences in power distance may affect the role of each actor in a service encounter. For example, in high-power distance cultures, providers of low expertise services will probably tend to be respectful and subservient to their customers because they consider themselves in a lower position. If customers from high power distance cultures deal with a service provider from a low power-distance culture, they might feel that they are treated too egalitarian and not respectful. However, it may be the other way around for high expertise services, where service providers have high knowledge and experience. Service providers who are accustomed to great power distance and who see themselves in a superior position, will expect customers to behave accordingly to their lower position. Canada, Germany the UK and US are low power distance cultures. They expect and provide more egalitarian services, and are less accepting of status differences. Customers and service providers from these cultures may feel uncomfortable interacting with others that consider themselves in a different status level. Thus, the following propositions are suggested:

***P6: During an inter-cultural service encounter, differences in power distance between a customer and a service provider have a (a) negative effect on their mutual understanding, (b) negative effect on their congruency in expectations.***

*Uncertainty Avoidance:* Societies with greater uncertainty avoidance tend to feel threatened by ambiguity, and they try to reduce it through stability and by establishing formal rules (Hofstede 1980). Meanwhile, in societies with low uncertainty avoidance, ambiguity is more tolerated and individuals tend to prefer fewer controls, thereby providing them with greater flexibility in determining how to accomplish goals. People in these societies tend to accept each day as it comes, take risks rather easily, and show a relatively greater tolerance for opinions and behaviours different from their own. Hofstede (1980) observes that cultures displaying high uncertainty avoidance also experience greater stress and anxiety when compared to weak uncertainty avoidance societies. Anxiety is often manifested into the level of aggressiveness displayed in social interactions. Thus, consumers from high uncertainty avoidance societies will show relatively greater preference for tangibles such as established brand name, superior warranty, and money-back guarantee as security, rather than empathy and care. The following propositions state the following:

***P 7: During an inter-cultural service encounter, differences in uncertainty avoidance between a customer and a service provider have a (a) negative effect on their mutual understanding, (b) negative effect on their congruency in expectations.***

*Masculinity/Femininity:* Masculinity pertains to societies in which social gender roles are clearly distinct, and men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life. Societies with high masculinity tend to admire qualities such as ambitiousness, achievement, and assertiveness, with an understanding that performance is



the means to gain wealth and admiration (Hofstede 1980). Meanwhile, cultures with higher femininity scores are associated with a patience and nurturance (Hofstede, 1980). Moreover, in feminine cultures, decision-making is participative and more prone to relationship formation (Arnold and Bianchi, 2000). These cultures compromise maintaining friendly working conditions. In a service encounter, customers from masculine societies will expect clearly defined gender roles, and will be uncomfortable with providers that differ from these roles. Customers from feminine societies will value relationship and understanding, and will feel uncomfortable with transactional providers. This leads to the following propositions:

***P8: During an inter-cultural service encounter, differences in masculinity between a customer and a service provider have a (a) negative effect on their mutual understanding, (b) negative effect on their congruency in expectations.***

#### Moderators Variables

Two characteristics of services are especially prone to the effect of culture: (1) the degree of intangibility of the service, and (2) the level of proximity of the service provider with the customer in the service encounter (Patterson and Cicic, 1995). These two variables are proposed to moderate the relationship between cultural differences and service encounter satisfaction.

*Intangibility:* Unlike goods that are physical/tangible objects, services at the end of the intangibility continuum are people based and hence not possible for consumers to experience, or inspect them before purchase (Patterson and Cicic, 1995). They are characterised by a higher level of experience of attributes that can only be evaluated during the service delivery process (Zeithaml et. al, 1993). They are often defined as performances where the provider and customer usually take part in the production process and jointly influence the quality of the output (Solomon et. al, 1985).

Cultural factors will exert greater influence on consumers' evaluations of highly intangible services than on their evaluations of more tangible services. As mentioned by role theory, scripts are learned under a specific culture and consumer's and service providers from different cultures are more probable to fail in reading from a common script. Especially, these deviations will be greater and lead to greater discrepancy in expectations for high intangible services due to a lack of tangible elements, which can guide a common script. Therefore, high intangible services will be more culture-sensitive than more tangible services and the relationship between cultural differences and inter-culture role discrepancy will be stronger. Thus, it is proposed:

***P9: During an inter-cultural service encounter, the effect of cultural differences on the congruency in expectations between a customer and a service provider will be stronger for highly intangible services than for more tangible services.***

*Degree of Proximity:* The degree of proximity required between the service provider and the customer during the service encounter is also relevant for assessing the effect of culture in services (Patterson and Cicic, 1995). Proximity has a strong impact on the perceptions of the interpersonal encounter (Price, Arnould and Tierney, 1995). Services that are characterised by a high degree of person-to-person interaction require considerable adaptation during the service encounter (Solomon et. al, 1985).

High degree of proximity in the service production process implies that the service contact situation has a relevant impact on the consumer's satisfaction with the service encounter. For inter-cultural service encounters where there is close proximity, misunderstandings are more likely to arise because of the difficulty for customers and service providers in achieving effective interpersonal communication instantaneously. Thus, highly proximal service encounters may be more culture-sensitive than low proximal service encounters and the relationship between cultural differences and mutual understanding will be stronger. This leads to the final proposition:

***P10: During an inter-cultural service encounter, the effect of cultural differences on mutual understanding between a customer and a service provider will be stronger for high than for low contact services.***

## **Conclusions**

In service encounters, people are “culture bearers” and interact directly in simultaneous production and consumption in the service encounter. These interactions are infused with the cultural idiosyncrasies that each party embodies. Role theory suggests that customers and service providers in well-understood service transactions will share parallel views of their roles and the expected sequence of events and behaviours. Shared view of the encounter should result in common notions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Bitner, Booms and Bohn, 1994)

Since culture plays an important role in determining how customers expect services to be delivered, today's service managers should be aware of the importance of adapting services to the new culture, while maintaining the core service quality standard. Especially for high intangible and high contact services (e.g., professional services), good employee-customer interactions are key, and a better understanding of how to adapt service delivery behaviour to the values of major cultural groups are highly beneficial to service managers.

Several managerial guidelines are suggested for reducing performance discrepancies in inter-cultural service encounters: First, service firms might benefit from providing cultural training to their service providers that move from one culture to another in order to create cultural awareness and sensibility. Second, service provider flexibility is necessary in order to adapt quickly to new cultural scripts in cross-cultural encounters. Third, effective communication between customer and provider is also necessary in inter-cultural service encounters because it can avoid discrepancy in customer and service provider expectations with respect of how the service delivery should be. Finally, when cultural problems occur, the service provider must be prepared for complaints and handle them correctly in order to avoid customer exit.

## **Future Research**

This paper has looked at the effect of cultural differences of customer and service provider on customer satisfaction with the service encounter. Future researchers could investigate extensions of this model to include the effect of other dimensions of cultural differences such as time orientation, relational orientation, language, and non-verbal communication. In addition, this model could be extended to include relational variables such as trust and commitment. Inter-cultural behaviour can also be affected by individual

differences due to personality features, knowledge, and experiences. These factors in fact can play a stronger part in actual service encounter situations.

Another area of research is the effect of cultural differences on service quality, and specifically on each dimension of service quality (e.g., empathy). Do cultural differences between customer and provider affect one dimension of service quality more than others? Finally, due to the increasing “importing” of customers with different cultural backgrounds to a common service encounter, (such as in entertainment), it is important to examine how firms can deal cultural differences in this type of encounter.

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